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ABSTRACT

This is the preliminary report of a project collating information from 15 European Union countries on professionals serving infants through 14-year-olds in nonformal educational settings. Findings include: (1) There is a great range of variation in the training of individuals working in non-traditional education and child care; this ranges from university trained practitioners to workers who may or may not have completed a 200 hour optional training program; (2) similarly, in some countries, there is a rigid training division which suggests that those working with very young children have access to less training than those working with children 4 or older; (3) in several countries, there is a move towards unifying the training system for those working with all age groups; but the inclusion of training for those working with preschool students lags behind these efforts; and (4) work tasks and professional roles differ widely for those working with various age groups. Three areas requiring further cross-national research are: (1) the goals and aims of training for child care professionals; (2) ways to widen the range of employment opportunities for educators; and (3) ways to redefine the relationship between parents and educators and child care professionals. (JW)

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Who works with young children?

Concepts and issues of staffing and professionalization in European countries[1]

Pamela Oberhuemer

Paper prepared for presentation at the Fifth European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education: "What should be the Educational Objectives for Early Childhood Education (0 - 7 years)?", Paris / Sorbonne, 7 - 9 September 1995

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[1] IFP-Project: Personnel in early childhood and out-of-school provision: Training and job profiles - A survey in the EU countries
Further research team members: Dr. Michaela Ulich, Monika Soltendieck

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Commonalities and differences in European child care

A recent comparative analysis of case study data from 11 European countries and 18 nations in other parts of the world stresses some common features of European child care when considered in a global perspective (Cochran 1995). Current European *policy* emphases are seen as being predominantly

- child centred rather than parent and community centred
- regulated rather than unregulated and
- publicly funded rather than privately arranged.

Policy debates are mainly concerned with issues of quality, with defining and assessing what is necessary and appropriate early childhood education and care.

The same study identifies current *programme* emphases as

- centre-based rather than home-based and
- child-oriented rather than teacher-directed.

On the whole, parents tend to play a marginal role rather than to be actively involved in the day to day operation of the programme. Considerable investment is made in the pre-service training of workers, whereas in many other parts of the world the qualifying process is generally on-the-job training.

Within this broad framework - Europe compared with the rest of the world - it is relatively easy to pinpoint commonalities. However, in the course of a current research study that I am involved in, we are becoming far more aware of the differences between European countries - in our particular case of differences in policy and practice concerning staffing and professionalization in the early childhood workfield. This paper will present emerging patterns and findings on some of these differences, since these are the issues which tend to stimulate debate and to help question policy and practice in one's own country. At the same time I should like to point out that it is not easy to condense findings and implications of such a wide-scale study into a short presentation - and I am very much aware of the problems of over-simplification and generalization.

IFP-project: aims and procedure

The purpose of our project, which is based at the State Institute of Early Childhood Education (IFP) in Munich and jointly funded by federal and local government, is to collate information from the 15 European Union countries on the training and work-place settings of personnel working with children from

birth to 14 years outside the compulsory school system. We have chosen this particular frame of reference - and not just the early years - because in Germany both pre-school and out-of-school provision are traditionally linked in a single legal and administrative framework, and staff are trained to work with a wide age-range of children in both pre-school and out-of-school settings. Today, however, I shall focus primarily on findings and issues concerning work with children up to the age of 5, 6 or 7, depending on the age at which compulsory schooling starts in the individual countries.

Our major research methods are multi-lingual document analysis and semi-structured interviews with a range of key informants representing different areas of expertise: administration, training, research and practice. The on-site interviews are proving to be an invaluable part of the research process and essential for accessing relevant data. The one-to-one exchange is important not only to gain information, but also in order to clarify terminology and to be able to "make sense" of the data, because - as we all know - similar terms and labels sometimes express quite different things in different countries.

Selected findings

In order to highlight some basic concepts and issues of staffing and professionalization I shall refer to some preliminary findings which focus primarily on training issues and to a lesser extent on workplace roles. In conclusion I shall outline some areas which could usefully be researched and debated in a cross-national context.

Training: level and length

The range in the level of training for group responsibility in non-compulsory education and care varies enormously. At one end of the spectrum we find university-trained practitioners with graduate status who have completed full-time periods of study lasting between three and five years. This is the case for work in the *écoles maternelles* in France, in the half-day kindergartens in Greece, in the new "schools for early childhood education" in Spain, and in the daycare centres in Sweden and Finland. This is also the case for work in nursery schools and classes in the UK, although it must be added that in England and Wales there is sufficient provision of this kind for only just over a quarter of the

appropriate age-group. In Italy a law passed in 1990 set the framework for raising training for work in the *scuola materna* to university level, but these plans have yet to be transformed into practice. In a further three countries - Belgium, Denmark and Portugal - training takes place at non-university higher education institutions and lasts three (Belgium, Portugal) or three and a half years (Denmark).

This contrasts with workers who may have completed an optional course of up to 200 hours, such as playgroup leaders in Ireland or the UK. In both of these countries playgroups are a widespread form of provision before children enter the school system. The 1989 Children Act in the UK, although for the first time empowering authorities to provide training for those engaged in child care, does not require them to do so. No particular qualifications are set down, nor is a specification made of the minimum amount of training and support necessary to enable workers to achieve acceptable standards of care (Curtis & Hevey 1992, p.202). This overall situation will presumably change following the introduction two years ago of National Vocational Qualifications in Child Care and Education - a multi-level system of awards which recognizes and assesses skills and experience gained through work. At the same time, there are several factors which make the application of this system to the field of child care and education difficult, such as the small-scale size of the organizations in the field, the traditional autonomy and responsibility that child care workers have, and the funding implications of establishing a system of qualified, off-site assessors.

Training: separate and unified schemes

In some countries there continues to be a discipline-related divide between the training considered necessary for working with very young children and that needed for working with children in pre-primary provision. In such cases staff working with children under 3 years of age tend either to have completed a shorter course of training or a training scheme with more of an emphasis on health and social care rather than education. This is the case in France, for example. All major forms of provision, including parent co-operatives, are staffed by professionals with a minimum of three-year post-18 training. Children under three may be in a *crèche collective* or *crèche parentale* supervised by a *puéricultrice* with a three-year nursing qualification followed by a one year specialist training for work with children or an *éducatrice* with a three-year training in education and social care at a vocational college. Teaching staff in the *écoles maternelles*, which virtually all three- to six-year-olds and over a third of two-

year-olds attend, have a three-year university degree followed by a two-year professional training at a university-based training institution.

However, in several countries there is a new move towards unifying the system of training for all age groups prior to compulsory schooling - in particular in countries where school entry age is six or seven years. Denmark, Finland, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden all now have such a unified system. In all these countries, with the exception of Germany, training takes place at a higher education institution; in Sweden, Spain and Finland it is university based.

Denmark and Spain are two countries which have just recently reformed their training systems in this direction. Regardless of the setting - whether day nursery, kindergarten or age-integrated centre -, all children in publicly funded centres in Denmark will - as from 1996 - be cared for and educated by a "pedagogue" who has received a three-and-a-half year training in education and social care at a higher education institution. In Spain - as from this academic year - all children aged from birth to six years with a place in the new "schools of early childhood education" (*escuelas de educación infantil*) will - in principle - be supervised by a specialist early years teacher with a four-year university training.

Training: degree of age-specialism

Related to the issue of a separate or unified system of training is the emphasis accorded to a specific age-group within the training (Oberhuemer/Ulich 1995, forthcoming). Greece, for example, has a dual system of training for two separately administrated kinds of early childhood services: half-day kindergartens and full-day centres. Both forms of training take place at higher education institutions. Aspiring kindergarten educators trained at university in a four-year degree course focus on the two to five-year-old age-group, and future workers in daycare centres focus in their three-and-a-half-year course of study on the age-range from birth to five or six years.

Denmark, by contrast, trains its "pedagogues" to work not only in all forms of early childhood services but also with school-age children in out-of-school provision and in various services for children and adults with special needs. It is a training for work with human beings "from the cradle to the grave" - as some practitioners like to put it. Generalization is seen to be a key quality

factor, whereas in Greece a high degree of specialization - especially in preparation for work in the half-day kindergartens - is considered necessary for quality work with young children.

Another area where policy and practice differ concerns the degree of integration of training for work in pre-school institutions into the training system for mainstream schooling. The Netherlands, the UK, France and to a certain extent Luxembourg have chosen an integrative model for work in pre-primary provision - in the case of Luxembourg for work in the now compulsory *éducation préscolaire* for four year olds. One problem emerging in some cases is the predominant importance attributed to compulsory schooling - resulting in an insufficient content focus on non-compulsory education. This leaves us with a question mark as to whether this alignment with the mainstream education system really is the best way of raising the status of pre-school education, which is often the reason given for such a move.

In summarizing this section on training I think it is fair to say that according to different traditions and priorities in the area of early childhood provision, countries vary in their approach and commitment to training for work with young children outside the compulsory school system. These differences are reflected in

- the large-scale funding of training,
- the level, length and appropriateness of training,

and in some cases in

- the discretionary nature of training altogether.

In most EU countries, however, the majority of children attending provision during the two years prior to school - and in some countries also younger children - are in groups with staff trained at a high level.

Workplace roles: different typologies

Not only are staff qualifications diverse, but also work tasks and professional roles. I cannot here go into details about the general conditions of work, such as the number of hours of contact time with children, or the size of groups and classes. Instead I should like to refer to two major typologies which seem to be emerging with regard to the staff acting as group leader or head of provision.

One is the education expert, the teacher, the specialist in working with children,

transmitting knowledge and cultural traditions in accordance with a well-defined curriculum framework. This role goes hand in hand with an understanding of pre-school institutions as an environment for preparing children step by step for school - if not exclusively, then at least primarily.

A role definition with a different kind of emphasis has been developing in recent years in some Scandinavian countries, and to an increasing extent in Germany. This role could be labelled the social network expert. Staff in pre-school services do not consider themselves to be teachers. Although they have a clear educative function, their training is separate from that of teachers for the compulsory school system. In Denmark and Sweden - following measures of decentralization - local institutions have been accorded a great deal of autonomy. Lead educators are responsible - in the case of Denmark in close collaboration with parents - for decision-making on the use of resources and funding as well as developing the educational programme, organizing teamwork and defining work tasks.

It is in these countries in particular that there is a growing interest in institutions with a multi-purpose role. Within this approach, institutions for children of pre-school age are viewed as an integral part of the community infrastructure, liaising where necessary with local organisations and services, and open to the needs of both children and parents.

Issues for cross-national research and debate

In conclusion I should like to outline just three areas out of many which would in my view benefit from more cross-national research and debate.

1. Systems of any kind tend to generate and perpetuate a dynamic of their own. This is also the case with training systems. It is therefore necessary to step back from time to time and to review overall aims and directions in terms of what this training is for. What kinds of services are necessary and desirable both for young children outside the compulsory school system and for their families? What is the major function of institutions in the regional social infrastructure? What is the balance to be worked towards between co-ordinating diversity and diversifying existing services? Priorities for training need to be viewed within such a context.

   It does seem that flexibility and diversification are becoming necessary

features of modern social institutions and that lead educators and support staff need basic and continuous training which equips them for working in multi-functional networks. This kind of approach makes complex demands on the staff, not only in their educative function but also in terms of management, leadership competence, and communication and advocacy skills.

A multi-purpose profile also has implications for the organization and specialization of work tasks within the institutions. Reorganizing the institutional framework and within it the workplace roles in order to be able to create a flexible response to diverse needs and goals is a topic which is currently creeping up the agenda of professional debate in Germany and an area which needs to be more fully researched. In particular: how can the children's right to quality education be safeguarded while also taking into account the legitimate and often diverse needs of different groups of parents?

2. Ways of widening access to the workfield - for both women and men - would also seem to be an area to consider, not only in terms of the continuing expansion of services, but also in terms of qualitative aspects concerning the relationships between adults and children. Qualifications structures will need to move towards more flexibility. In our study we can detect an increase in part-time training courses and modular schemes and the gradual introduction of more flexible entry requirements to higher education. One example is the new BA in Early Childhood Studies at North London University, a part-time modular course for those who work with young children with no formal academic entry requirements. What seems to be needed in many countries - and this is certainly the case in Germany - is a more purposefully coherent conceptual and structural framework for both pre-service and in-service training and professional development.

3. Educating and caring for young children outside the home is no longer a separate or supplementary service for a relatively small number of children. High quality early childhood provision represents both a socially desired and desirable service to which all children should have access. Within such a framework it is necessary to redefine the nature of the partnership between professionals and parents and between different kinds of professionals. Existing concepts of professionalism and the implications for training need to be re-examined in this context.

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